Excerpts: His Highness the Aga Khan on diversity as a strength in Creation, in religion, in culture and intellectual endeavour

"In the final analysis, no nation, no race, no individual has a monopoly of intelligence or virtue. If we are to pursue the ideal of meritocracy in human endeavour, then its most perfect form will grow out of a respect for human pluralism, so that we can harness the very best contributions from whomever and wherever they may come."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 2009 University of Alberta Graduation Ceremony address (Edmonton, Alberta)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/9281/

"The spirit of the Knowledge Society is the spirit of Pluralism -- a readiness to accept the Other, indeed to learn from him, to see difference as an opportunity rather than a threat. Such a spirit must be rooted, I believe, in a sense of humility before the Divine, realising that none of us have all the answers, and respecting the broad variety of God's creation and the diversity of the Human Family."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 2006 Aga Khan University Convocation Ceremony address (Karachi, Pakistan)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/7997/
"In a world that claims to be globalised, there are some who might regard cultural standardisation as natural, even desirable. For my part, I believe that marks of individual and group cultural identity generate an inner strength which is conducive to peaceful relations. I also believe in the power of plurality, without which there is no possibility of exchange. In my view, this idea is integral to the very definition of genuine quality of life."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 2008 Address to the Avignon Forum 'The value and importance of cultural diversity and its role in promoting peace and development' (Avignon, France)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/9065/

"The second point I would emphasise today is that our Academy initiative -- in Dhaka and elsewhere -- is one that strongly affirms the integrity of local and national cultures. To be sure, this new Academy will connect its students to global perspectives. But it will also respect the central role of each person's particular heritage as a cornerstone of his or her identity and an enriching gift of the Creator. The beauty of Creation is a function of its variety. A fully homogenised world would be far less attractive and interesting. The roots we inherit from our history -- linking us to a particular past -- are a great source of strength and joy and inspiration."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 2008 Aga Khan Academy, Dhaka, Foundation Stone Ceremony address (Dhaka, Bangladesh)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/8787/

"Why would homogenisation be such a danger? Because diversity and variety constitute one of the most beautiful gifts of the Creator, and because a deep commitment to our own particularity is part of what it means to be human. Yes, we need to establish connecting bonds across cultures, but each culture must also honour a special sense of self. The downside of globalisation is the threat it can present to cultural identities...."
"In the final analysis, the great problem of humankind in a global age will be to balance and reconcile the two impulses of which I have spoken: the quest for distinctive identity and the search for global coherence. What this challenge will ultimately require of us, is a deep sense of personal and intellectual humility, an understanding that diversity itself is a gift of the Divine, and that embracing diversity is a way to learn and to grow -- not to dilute our identities but to enrich our self-knowledge."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 2008 'The Peterson Lecture' at the Annual Meeting of the International Baccalaureate (Atlanta, Georgia, USA)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/8435/

"One of history's great lessons is that a society can underwrite human progress only when it overcomes its insularity and suspicion of 'the other,' and instead, looks upon difference as a source of strength. For, while our new century continues to be marred by conflict and tension, the effective world of tomorrow is a pluralist one which comprehends, welcomes and builds on diversity. That is why I passionately view the struggle against poverty, and respect for the values of pluralism, as two of the most significant tests of whether the 21st Century is to be an era of global peace, stability and progress."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 2006 Acceptance Address Honorary Doctorate, University of Evora (Evora, Portugal)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/7654/

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Rajiv Mehrotra: I think there is an anxiety in many developing societies including India, that modernisation is frequently meant Westernisation, that technology is meant a sense of alienation from the community, from one's immediate environment, the disintegration of the family etcetera, etcetera. When you go in with development strategies and development models, is there an
overview of an ideal society that you seek to perpetuate or encourage?

**Aga Khan:** No, there is no total view in my perception, simply because I view diversity as strength, and that may be a funny statement to make, but I think that in diversity there is great strength if it is understood that diversity must not be encouraged to become conflict. But the different cultures, different faiths, different languages, different traditions should be looking at common issues and starting from different standpoints but trying to resolve them collaboratively. That is a major force and it is only divisive if it is to turn into something divisive. Otherwise it’s very powerful. I am personally concerned about a loss of cultural tradition and I would like to see cultural traditions enhanced but it doesn’t have to be at the exclusion of others. What it means is that a cultural tradition is a human inheritance in a given society. Let that be continued and enhanced....

**Rajiv Mehrotra:** You said you are not a politician. What kind of role do you see for yourself, beyond the context of being the Imam for your community?

**Aga Khan:** Well, I would like to be able to convince people that they can work towards common objectives, no matter what backgrounds they come from in language, in faith, in society, that one doesn’t have to give up one’s heritage or one’s individuality or one’s faith. To set and achieve common goals as long as they are well determined and shared, and if that can happen in the developing world -- and certainly not through my input alone -- but to me, it would be a substantial achievement, because it would be convincing people from different backgrounds, different societies, that their differences are not weakness and they do not have to be translated into conflict. They can be translated into immense strength and benefit for everybody.

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1989 All India TV and Radio Interview with Rajiv Mehrotra (India)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/4296/
"Surely, one of the great questions of our time is whether we can learn to live creatively with both the global and the tribal impulse, embracing the adventure of a broader internationalism even as we drink more deeply from the wellsprings of a particular heritage."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 1986 Commonwealth Press Union Conference Keynote Address (Cape Town, South Africa)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/5137/

"Since the end of the Cold War, a number of factors appear to have been common and significant ingredients, if not the primary cause, of many of the conflicts we have witnessed. Perhaps the most common of these ingredients has been the failure of those involved to recognise the fact that human society is essentially pluralist ..."

"Whether it be in Central Europe, the Great Lakes region in Africa, or in Afghanistan -- to cite just one example from three different continents -- one of the common denominators has been the attempt by communal groups, be they ethnic, religious, or tribal groups, to impose themselves on others. All such attempts are based on the principle of eradicating the cultural basis that provides group identity. Without cultural identity, social cohesion gradually dissolves and human groups lose their necessary point of reference to relate with each other, and with other groups."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 2002 Concluding Address to the Prince Claus Fund Conference on Culture and Development(Amsterdam, The Netherlands)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/6351/

"This brings me to the story of Canada, shaped so fundamentally by two European cultures. This dual inheritance was an apparent weakness at one point, but it was transformed into an enormous
strength thanks to leaders like LaFontaine and Baldwin, as well as those who shaped the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1982, and so many others who contributed to a long, incremental process.

"That process has been extended over time to include a broader array of peoples, the First Peoples, and the Inuits, and a host of new immigrant groups. I am impressed by the fact that some 44 percent of Canadians today are of neither French nor British descent. I am told, in fact, that a typical Canadian citizenship ceremony might now include people from two dozen different countries. [Emphasis original]"

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"Canada has for many years been a beacon to the rest of the world for its commitment to pluralism and its support for the multicultural richness and diversity of its peoples. It is precisely this diversity that sustains the moral and dynamic coherence in public life that Canada has so successfully constructed, and is predicated on the ethic of respect for human dignity. The country has fully embraced pluralism as a foundation for its strength and growth and I am convinced that this is absolutely necessary for the stability of an interdependent world....

"The need for better understanding across cultures has never been greater -- or more pressing. It is important that the diversity of cultures -- and the inherent pluralism that characterises many societies today -- be acknowledged as a vital asset and a prerequisite for progress and development."

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"Muslims are spread around the globe -- basically in the Third World -- from the hottest of deserts to the wettest of flood plains, to the coldest of the highest mountains. Their countries are of infinite variety and have been born from and have given birth to great civilisations. They come from numerous ethnic backgrounds and speak hundreds, if not thousands, of local languages. Yet all 800 million share the same faith. I believe that like Canadians, Muslims can draw strength from their diversity but they certainly cannot be condemned if they sometimes fail."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 1985 Ismaili Centre Opening Ceremony address (Burnaby, Canada)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/3183/

"Within the Islamic world there is work to do as well [in addressing the mutual 'clash of ignorance'], starting with a better understanding and appreciation of the pluralism of cultures and interpretations among Muslims. The legacy is rich, a source of strength, and needs to be encouraged and celebrated. It is also crucial that the Islamic world develops a creative and reasoned response to the impact of Western popular culture, which coupled with the dominance of modern electronic media by Western corporations, poses a serious threat to local and national identities and cultures, and their creative and sustainable evolution."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 2002 address at the Banquet in Honour of the Governor of Texas (Houston, Texas, USA)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/6256/

"... I think we have difficulty making people around the world realise what is the Islamic World. One should not confuse Sub-Saharan Africa with Central Asia. One should not confuse Central Asia with countries of Asia such as Malaysia and Indonesia. These
are different peoples, with different histories, that have been converted to Islam at different times, that have evolved since then, that have different languages, that have different interpretations. What is the big problem? It is to know if that diversity is a strength or a weakness. And what I say is that the Muslim World -- well, what I wish -- is that the Muslim World looks at that situation as if it was a marvellous opportunity. Not that diversity weakens us. That is the fundamental problem.”

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2001 Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation Interview (Aleppo, Syria and Lebanon) [Translation]
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/6073/

"[A]s all segments of the Islamic world are healthy, lively and creative, that diversity is a source of strength and not weakness. Those who seek to impose a political view on the Islamic World or a religious view are, in my opinion, really not working for the benefit of the Islamic World. There is no way that you can impose a single view on nine hundred million people in so many different countries of the world."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1983 Pakistan and Gulf Economist Interview with Aftab Ahmad Khan (Karachi, Pakistan)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/2799/

"... I believe, that Britain will serve the Commonwealth best in the material sense if she concentrates her limited resources on technical projects of immediate and practical value. And if she hopes to win the ideological battle she should not be afraid to encourage the natural flowering of different national personalities within the Commonwealth. They will not always follow British precedents, but in their very diversity will be born a new and lasting strength."

"Such strength in diversity is a quality which can be of immense value in the modern world whose problems are less and less
national and increasingly global, before long even inter-terrestrial, in scope."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 1960 Lecture at Oxford University under the auspices of the Royal Commonwealth Society, 'Ismaili Community and its Contribution to the Commonwealth' (Oxford, United Kingdom)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/1322/

"My hope for Uganda is that it can continue to build a culture which sees diversity and difference, peacefully expressed, as a source of potential strength rather than a cause of harmful division. Even as we take deep pride in our own personal traditions we also know that we can learn a great deal from those who have come from different backgrounds and who hold different perspectives.

"As this resurgent cosmopolitan spirit continues to develop in Uganda, it can be a profound source of strength for this country and indeed for the entire world. All across our planet in these early years of the 21st century, people are learning to live with other people who are different from them but who are suddenly and closely connected."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 2007 address at the Banquet Hosted in Honour of the President of Uganda (Kampala, Uganda)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/8256/

Aga Khan: ... First of all I start from the premise of Pakistan -- a big country, a big population, a spread of Muslims from all interpretations of the faith, a rural country with a reasonably developed industrial sector, but not an extensively developed industrial sector, that makes me think of a country whose development could, and In'sha'Allah will, be multi-faceted; not a monolithic economy; not a monolithic society; perhaps not even a monolithic interpretation of the faith. In that sense, Pakistan represents the multifaceted face of the Islamic World. Therefore,
within its frontiers it contains all the challenges, all the opportunities of the Islamic World. What I hope is that in its diversity, there will be a sense of strength rather than a sense of antagonism, or conflict. And that sense of strength which could come from many different peoples, many different attitudes, is perhaps one of the greatest opportunities.

**Pakistan Television Corporation:** Here we talk of the classical heritage of Islam and of course the rapid, endless innovations of modern architecture. There are some very strange buildings that we see and come across in our television programmes as well sometimes from the West. Do you think it is possible to create a meaningful blend of the two in the future? Or would they just go in different directions?

**Aga Khan:** No. I again think there is strength in diversity. Let me explain. I don’t think the type of architecture you will get in countries like Indonesia and Malaysia will be identical to the type of architecture you get in the Gulf. I don’t think the Gulf will be identical to the architecture you get in the mountains in Hunza and Chitral. You will always have a local element in that architecture. I am looking at the inspiration behind that. What is man’s relationship to his family? What is man’s relationship to his environment? God’s blessings in the forms of water, sand, colour -- how are those used? How do we use them to improve our living conditions? Those, I think, are the inspiring forces that Islamic architects, Muslim architects will revitalise. Now I hope they will revitalise. Now I hope they will revitalise this in a form which is appropriate to their own culture, their own climate, and their own environment. The inspiration is there.

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1985 Pakistan Television Corporation Interview (Karachi, Pakistan)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/3209/

"Some years ago we gathered a group of eminent scholars of Islamic culture and distinguished architects and designers representing all
major faiths, in a series of seminars to wrestle with the challenge of coming up with a definition of Islamic architecture. One of the first outcomes of the effort was the conclusion that no single definition exists because over its long and distinguished history, Islamic architecture has reflected different climates, times, materials, building technologies and political philosophies.

"But this is a very important finding in itself. It shows that trying to establish a norm would be counter productive, because it would stifle that strength which comes from the diversity and pluralism of Muslim societies, past and present, and the creativity of those who will build around us in the years ahead. Unfortunately there are forces at work in the Islamic world that seek to establish just such a norm. This makes it all the more important that we strive to counter such efforts by employing all the means of intellectual discourse -- research, discussion, celebration of innovative projects, and the commissioning of freshly conceived but well researched new buildings."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 2002 Ismaili Center Opening Ceremony address (Houston, Texas, USA)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/6245/

"The diversity of architecture in secular and in religious buildings in the Islamic World is extraordinary, is an important strength, and is a resource for the community. This plurality of cultural traditions within the widest interpretation of the all-encompassing faith of Islam is, however, relatively unknown and very poorly understood, particularly in the West, which thinks, too often, of all things Islamic in narrow, normative terms."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 1997 Stone Town Cultural Centre Opening Ceremony address (Zanzibar, Tanzania)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/5264/
"In many areas it is also possible to revitalise or strengthen cultural assets -- be they buildings, musical forms, or crafts -- as potential attractions or products for those tourists interested in mountains and mountain cultures. The point was made in the opening plenary that mountain areas have the highest level of bio-diversity of any ecological zone. It is equally true that mountains have more cultural diversity than any other physical setting. This is a great source of strength and an asset and should be supported as such."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 2002 Bishkek Global Mountain Summit Keynote Address (Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/6382/

"The distinctive nature of the Aga Khan University is not put forward as a [model?] for all others to follow. In fact, the very diversity of institutions of higher education in Pakistan and in the developing world is a source of strength that should be multiplied, not limited."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 1991 Aga Khan University Convocation Ceremony address (Karachi, Pakistan)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/4486/

See also: His Highness the Aga Khan on globalism - Part 7/7: the hazard of a superficial, homogenised mega-culture

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